

Bexhill Old Town



Sussex

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Bexhill Museum

No. L 1588 b

BEXHILL OLD TOWN

By Rex Salter

The earliest reference to Bexhill in the Domesday Book refers to it as the paramount manor of Bexelei.

But in early days many alternative spellings were given it such as Bixlea, Bexle, Becksley or Bixle.

Various explanations as to the origin of the name have been advanced. One which has some favour is that the Saxons called a brook a beck, so that the name could be derived from the large number of streams to be found in the district.

The hill does not need explanation, for modern Bexhill is entirely of twentieth century development and prior to this it consisted of the settlement grouped around the church and manor house in the Old Town.

In 1871 for example the population of Bexhill was 2,158 while early in the next century, in 1911, it had reached 15,330.

A well-known journalist, George R. Sims, who was a resident of Little Common and contributed a column to the "Referee", did a great deal to publicise Bexhill as a residential watering place, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Earlier Diplock's Guide of 1820 stated:-

"Bexhill is about six miles to the west of Hastings and a most delightful morning ride along the coast. There were here extensive barracks established and for several years occupied by German troops as their Chief Military depot."

The German troops were billeted here during the Napoleonic Wars, the barracks being situated on land on the north side of Belle Hill, stretching from the Old Town to the present London Road.

There is a strong tradition that the Duke of Wellington — the Iron Duke himself — stayed at Barrack Hall at the top end of the High Street.

The Old Town of the 1870's must have been a most picturesque spot. For a highly respected local medical practitioner, Dr. Wills, wrote of it then:- "A tiny village crowded in between the venerable church and ancient manor house nestling among trees and looking down across breezy slopes onto the white coastguard station and the open channel. Between it and St. Leonards there were scarce half a dozen houses and the road still had its high hedges full of bramble and wild flowers all the way into the village. First one passed two great cornstalks which seem to have been built from time immemorial on the same spot.

One saw across a little hollow the church and handsome rectory standing among the trees of the park-like glebe. Then the road ran by a long quaint house, which in process of time has grown by adaptation out of stabling and offices of an old coal mine — or rather of a mine for coal, seeing that notwithstanding £80,000 spent on looking for it no coal ever came to light. On past the gables of the old manor house with its choked stew ponds below and so underneath the boughs of a huge walnut tree into the street to the ancient inn and quaint old church with its dormer windows and stuccoed tower.

Continued overleaf.

On turning to the left past a hideous quasi-modern house in which tradition says the Iron Duke once quartered and by the village smithy one reached the brow of a steep declivity and saw across some half mile of corn and pasture the wide light blue of the open channel, with the broad sweep of Pevensey Bay and all the country up to Lewes gap, the grand smooth lines of the South Downs and Beachy Head girdling round the lowlands like a picture frame."

Prior to the Norman Conquest the Manor was vested in the See of Selsey, where in Saxon times there was a cathedral. In 772 it was granted to the Bishop by Offa, King of the Mercians. The deed of reversion is still preserved in the library of Lambeth Palace, with a copy at St. Peter's.

Following upon the Norman invasion the Manor remained the property of Count Robert of Eu, but in 1147 was re-assigned to the See by John, Count of Eu.

There are articles in this guide on the Parish Church and the ancient Lychgate and Lychgate Cottage and these together with the Manor House are of outstanding interest to visitors to the Old Town.

The Manor House was originally the Bishop's Palace or fortified Manor House at the eastern end of the See, being presented to him by Robert the Cruel, an ancestor of the Ashburnham family.

It was almost certainly rebuilt in the 13th century by Bishop Melyns.

In the middle of the sixteenth century it was separated from the See.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century it was occupied by the bailiff for the Manor, Squire Brook. But Arthur Brook moved to the Grange at the top of Sea Road and the Manor House fell into a sad state of disrepair.

However, it was later renovated by Viscount Cantelupe.

In 1894 and 1896 the two most important cricket matches ever to be played in Bexhill took place on the Manor House ground with the visits of the South African and Australian touring teams.

Later occupants of the Manor House were Neven du Mont, son of a Cologne publisher, who was the Master of the East Sussex Foxhounds and Sir Leicester Harmsworth, brother of Lord Northcliffe, who possessed a magnificent library.

His widow remained at the Manor House until her death in 1963 and subsequently it was bought by Bexhill Corporation for £23,000.

The ancient part of the building in the centre still remains at the front where there has now been established some delightful ornamental gardens.

As I write I have before me an ordnance survey map of Bexhill of the middle of the nineteenth century.

It shows that only a century or so ago Bexhill still virtually consisted only of the settlement in the Old Town.

Its link with the modern town consisted of a muddy lane called Sea Lane which ran to Lane End House at the bottom of the present Sea Road.

The area to the South of the Old Town consisted entirely of Farm land and the coastguard cottages, on the site of the present De La Warr Pavilion car park, were virtually the only other residences apart from farm houses.



MANOR HOUSE IN 1904



MANOR HOUSE ORNAMENTAL GARDENS

OUR MOST TREASURED POSSESSION

(By the Rector of Bexhill, the Rev. Canon M.D. Townroe)

For over twelve centuries the generations that have come and gone have regarded St. Peter's as in a real sense 'their' church, a treasured possession that belongs to the whole community. Those living in the small village, we now call 'Old Town', and others in the scattered farm cottages beyond, will have looked upon the sturdy tower, which goes back to Norman times, as a symbol of that strong and robust faith that nourished and supported them from the cradle to the grave. Within the building they shared in the joyful occasions of baptisms and weddings, the great moments of national rejoicing, and the sad times of mourning or the urgent ones of prayer when enemies threatened. Day by day worship has been offered and prayers said by countless numbers of men and women, boys and girls, imparting to the building that atmosphere of peace and holiness felt by those who enter its doors.

The wish of King Offa, expressed in the famous Charter, has been fulfilled. There has been a place of worship and the ministry of a priest "to serve the praise of God and the honour of the saints" from that day, August 15th in the year 772, which marks the first recorded moment in the history of Bexhill. And there has never since been quite such a galaxy of Kings, Bishops and Aldermen concerned with our welfare, for the Charter was signed by three kings, of the Mercians, Kent and the West Saxons, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and four other bishops and four aldermen!

The first church would have been in the simple Saxon style of nave and square-ended sanctuary, with walls of irregular rubble and ashlar. There still exists today, mounted in a case on the south side of the tower, one of our most precious and interesting possessions, the beautifully carved 8th-century stone, probably the lid of a reliquary containing the relics of saints.

When William and his forces marched inland to do battle with Harold they would have seen the little Saxon Church of St. Peter. It may well have been some of his capable and experienced stone masons from Normandy who, having built Battle Abbey, came here to replace our small building with a larger and stronger Norman edifice. Its massive tower would have served as a look-out post across the marshes to Pevensey and out to sea. The fine pillars and connecting arcades of this period remain to this day among the most distinguished features of the interior, which contains so much of interest and beauty.

The next period of change came early in the 13th century. The small Norman sanctuary was replaced by a noble Early English chancel. About 1450 a south chapel was added and, at the same time, the Chantry Chapel on the north side was built. This was turned into the first schoolroom for the parish, by the Rector, Dr. Thomas Pye, in the reign of Elizabeth I.

The growth of population led to the introduction of ugly galleries in the 18th century, which were removed in 1878 when the south aisle was enlarged and the chancel extended during a major restoration scheme. Some, at the time, spoke with dismay of their much-loved church being "handed over to the tender mercy of Mr. Butterfield". Later, in 1906, the accommodation was further extended by the building of a new north aisle.

During the last twenty years a great deal of restoration and redecoration work has been carried out, including the repair of death watch beetle ravages and major work to the fine organ, and the building of a choir vestry.

The whole town shared in the 1200th anniversary, with 1972 being observed as "Charter Celebration Year". This was inaugurated by Princess Alexandra at a service of Praise and Dedication. Among those present were the Lord Lieutenant, the Duke of Norfolk, the Lady in Waiting, Lady Mary Fitzalan-Howard, the Bishop of Chichester, who preached the sermon, the Bishop of Arundel and Brighton, leaders of the Free Churches, the Mayor and Mayoress of Bexhill, and a large and representative congregation from town and county. Almost every organisation in the town was involved in the very full programme of events that followed throughout the year. At St. Peter's a great variety of recitals and special services were arranged. Visiting preachers included many who had served in the parish and, among others, the Primate of All Ireland, the Dean of Westminster, and the Bishops of Lewes, of Arundel and Brighton, of Horsham and Nakuru in Kenya.



ST. PETER'S CHURCH

ST. PETER'S COMMUNITY CENTRE

By the Rector of Bexhill, the Rev. Canon M.D. Townroe

The traditional role of the Church in caring for the needs of the community has a long history. One outward expression of it was, for example, the Poor Relief Act of 1601. Parish overseers, two of whom had to be churchwardens, were appointed to provide the relief and to raise the money by rates levied on property. Another was the concern for education that led in this parish to the building of St. Peter's School in Holliers Hill in 1853.

In more recent times, the Church has found itself called upon to assist, in partnership often with the State, in providing educational, social and recreational facilities for young people and adults. Mr. L.J. Bartley, in his 'Story of Bexhill', records that an outstanding development since the second World War has been the Community Association movement, of which the pioneer in this town was Canon Godfrey Bell, Rector from 1941 to 1953. During the war he inspired a scheme to provide a community centre which would aim to carry the spirit of comradeship of those war days, into the peace. The St. Peter's Association was formed in 1946, using the two older church halls dating back to the early twenties. The present Centre includes the fine new hall completed in 1955.

A measure of the activities now taking place in these three halls, morning, afternoon and evening, may be indicated by the fact that there are over 2,100 bookings a year; and that, many thousands of people of all ages pass through its doors during the year. The organisation requires the daily attention of the Warden and Deputy Warden during the office hours each morning and often at other times throughout the day.

The range of activities includes painting, keep-fit, dancing, bridge, dressmaking, yoga and other classes. Numerous clubs and associations use the Centre either on a regular or occasional basis. Youth organisations that hold their meetings each week include Naval Cadets, Guides, Brownies and the Junior Church. Many bookings are made by those wishing to use the halls for family celebrations, anniversaries and wedding receptions, and for various cultural and social gatherings, and those associated with money-raising events for good causes.

LIVING HISTORY IN THE OLD TOWN

No visit to Bexhill's Old Town would be complete without a visit to view Lychgate and Lychgate Cottage standing near St. Peter's Church.

They were named after the Lychgate leading to the churchyard and were originally a Wealden house. The archaeological significance of which is disclosed in an article written by the Deputy Editor of the Bexhill Observer, John Dowling.

The article appeared in our local paper in September 1968 and is re-produced by permission of the newspaper.

A lychgate was originally erected for bearers to rest coffins before proceeding to the church and burial ground.

John Dowling writes:-

Sometime during the era in which Agincourt was fought, a substantial house was erected by a comparatively wealthy landowner alongside the graveyard of St. Peter's Church.

The house was typical of its period. It was dominated by a single large hall extending from floor to rafters.

In a demonstration of "communal living" that today would seem strange in Britain, every occupant shared this single room — dominated by a vast central fireside.

At the front there would have been a prominent overhang or "jetty". A second jetty probably ran along one side. At the rear ran a passageway known as an "aisle".

This once-common combination of features is known to today's domestic archaeologists as a "Wealden House".

Until this week only one example of a wealden house was known to have survived with its distinguishing features intact — and even that was not fully confirmed.

Now to the delight and excitement of expert and owner alike a second wealden house has been discovered and seems likely to be confirmed.

It is the house in Old Town, still standing near the 1,200-year old church of St. Peter and named after the nearby lychgate to the churchyard.

The discovery that Bexhill possesses one of only two medieval "Wealden" houses known to have survived the centuries could give a valuable boost to the movement to enhance the attractiveness of Old Town.

Today, centuries of alteration and extension cloak the true origins of Lychgate and Lychgate Cottage in Church Street.

Mrs. Audrey Hodgson bought both with the intention of living in the former and opening the latter as tea rooms.

It was the enthusiasm of her youngest son William, aged ten, fired by a school history project, that led to the discovery.

William, convinced that the cellars contained a long-hidden tunnel, began digging debris out of a hole in the cellar floor.

Soon a large circular hole was uncovered. William's mother, keenly interested in history and a member of Old Town Preservation Society, contacted Bexhill Museum.

Museum Association chairman, Mr. Dick Child, took over the cellar dig, finding a second smaller hole.

Soon he had called in the best known local expert on early domestic architecture.

Mr. David Martin, of Robertsbridge, and his wife Barbara (whose parents live in Bexhill) won third prize this year in an award scheme for amateur archaeologists run by the television programme, Chronicle.

Continued overleaf.

Their self-imposed task is to compile a detailed survey of 3,300 known Medieval houses surviving in the Rape (ancient administrative area) of Hastings.

An 18th century or early 19th century brick facade in front, a former builder's yard and store behind and a rabbit warren of low-beamed rooms and precipitous staircases within the two properties did not hide the truth from Mr. Martin.

"This is undoubtedly a 15th century Wealden house, one of only two of its type known in England," explained excitedly.

"Medieval hall houses with jetties are still quite common. But in addition this building has an aisle at the back and it is this combination which makes it so rare."

More gems may be awaiting discovery. Despite their differing frontages, adjoining properties may be a "mirror image" of the hall house.

David Martin's researches may well extend to these if he can obtain permission to view them. But when his drawings of Lychgate and Lychgate Cottage are finished and filed he and his wife will press on with the result of their 3,300 house survey.

Mr. Child's cellar dig will continue. The larger hole could be a well. Or it could be an old cess pit which could indicate the existence of an even older house on the site.

Who would have built such a house? The Church is one distinct possibility and county archives with their church and manorial records may hold the answer.

"The whole idea of taking this place on and converting it into a tea room was to give the public a chance to see part of the real Old Town," said Mrs. Hodgson.

"This discovery makes it all so much more interesting".

Both Canon Michael Townroe, Rector of St. Peter's, and Old Town Preservation Society chairman, Councillor Don Kimber, are delighted with the news.

Both believe that with the opening of the by-pass to busy High Street, Old Town will gain a new lease of life, a haven of quiet charm and historic interest.

BEXHILL MANOR COSTUME MUSEUM

(By Christine Portch)

The Museum of Period Costumes is housed in the Old Manor Library, Bexhill Old Town, and is one of three buildings which still remain within the Manor House grounds, the original Manor having been partially demolished in 1970 to allow for road building.

In 1972 Mrs. Christine Portch and Miss Isabel Overton, joint principals of the Thalia School of Speech and Drama, applied to Rother District Council for permission to set up and open a Museum of Costume. Permission was immediately given and after a great deal of preparation, cleaning and decorating, (the building had hitherto been used as a store and repair shop), the Museum was opened as part of the activities held in 1972, to celebrate the 1200th anniversary of the granting of a charter for the building of a church in Bexhill.

Originally intended to be a temporary exhibition for Charter Year, the venture was so successful that it was decided to make this a permanent feature of the Manor House ground.

Each year about 50% of the exhibits are changed and re-arranged; this makes the Museum of renewed interest, particularly to residents who are pleased to bring their visitors in succeeding seasons.

In addition to costumes and lace, there are toys, dolls, sewing machines, vacuum cleaners, etc. a small section of items relating to both World Wars, and a late Victorian/Edwardian kitchen.

The Museum has been described by an Authority as a "potted social history" and is of intense interest to all age groups, being both educational and nostalgic.

All visitors (unless they request otherwise) are given a guided tour of the exhibits. A guide book is also available and the Museum shop offers many relevant books, costume dolls and other articles for sale.

Any correspondence in respect of the Museum should be addressed to:-
Christine Portch, 103 Belle Hill, Bexhill - Tel: 215361 or 210813. Please note the Museum is open from Easter to the end of September.

Tuesday to Friday:- 10.30-1.00 and 2.30-5.30
and Bank Holidays.

Saturday and Sunday:- 2.30-5.30

Parties of 12 or more are advised to contact the Museum in advance.



LYCHGATE

THE JUBILEE MEMORIAL CLOCK

(By F.W. Gillham)

To mark Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1887 the clock was purchased by public subscription for the use of the residents of Bexhill and was erected on its present site by permission of the then owner. At that time the building was a warehouse connected to a grocery shop owned by a Mr. Pennington Gorringe.

In the same year, a Deed was drawn up vesting the interest in the clock in trust on behalf of the residents. Three trustees were appointed.

Since that time a Committee has acted as custodians of the clock and through public donations has maintained it and been responsible for the weekly winding.

A local newspaper cutting at the time states:-

"Jubilee Memorial ——— that at a meeting of inhabitants of Old Bexhill, at the Assembly Rooms of the Bell Hotel, they were informed that a requisition had been received from the officers of 'The Welcome Home Lodge' (of Oddfellows) ——— saying they would much prefer a clock to a reading room. The clock to be erected on the church or elsewhere in Old Bexhill. There was a great attendance at this meeting. The report goes on to say that the church tower was in such a crumbling state that it was not considered safe to erect a clock.

An order for a clock was eventually placed and an offer made by Mr. Gorringe to have it fitted to his warehouse. The clock, together with bell to strike the hours, was supplied by a local clocksmith, Mr. P. Shindler.

The clock continued to function until 1908 when a great fire gutted the building destroying the clock works housed inside on the top floor. The external part was little damaged and remained and new works were replaced by Mr. Shindler.

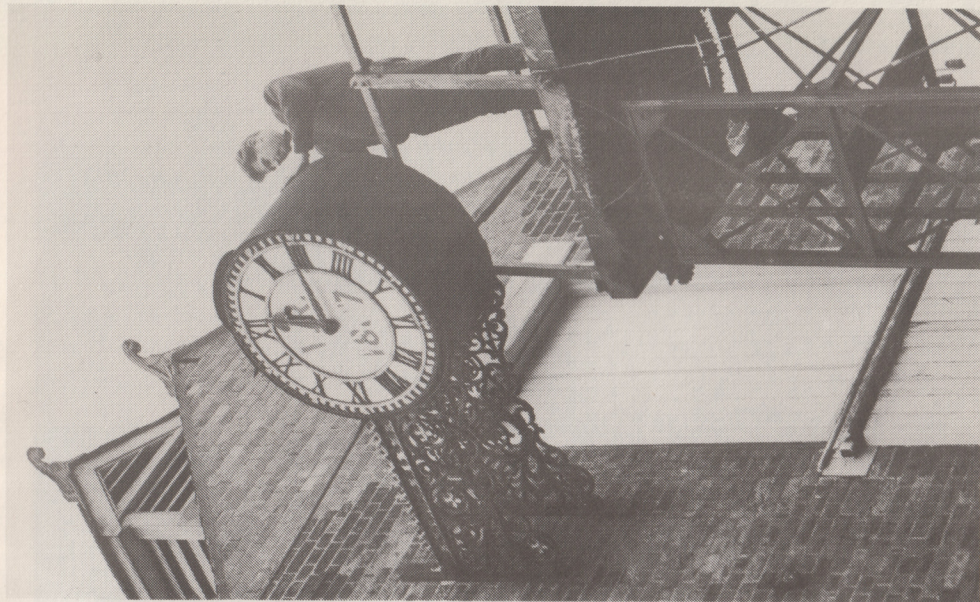
The clock continued and remained a great feature of the Old Town, striking each hour for some 80 years until 1969 when objection was raised by some residents concerning its striking bell during the night.

This was followed by a dispute of ownership of the clock when the building changed hands in 1971.

The clock ceased to function whilst efforts to resolve the dispute went on and the Clock Committee, or its agent, were refused access to the works.

In 1978 the custody of the clock was handed over to the committee of the Preservation Society and an additional trustee appointed.

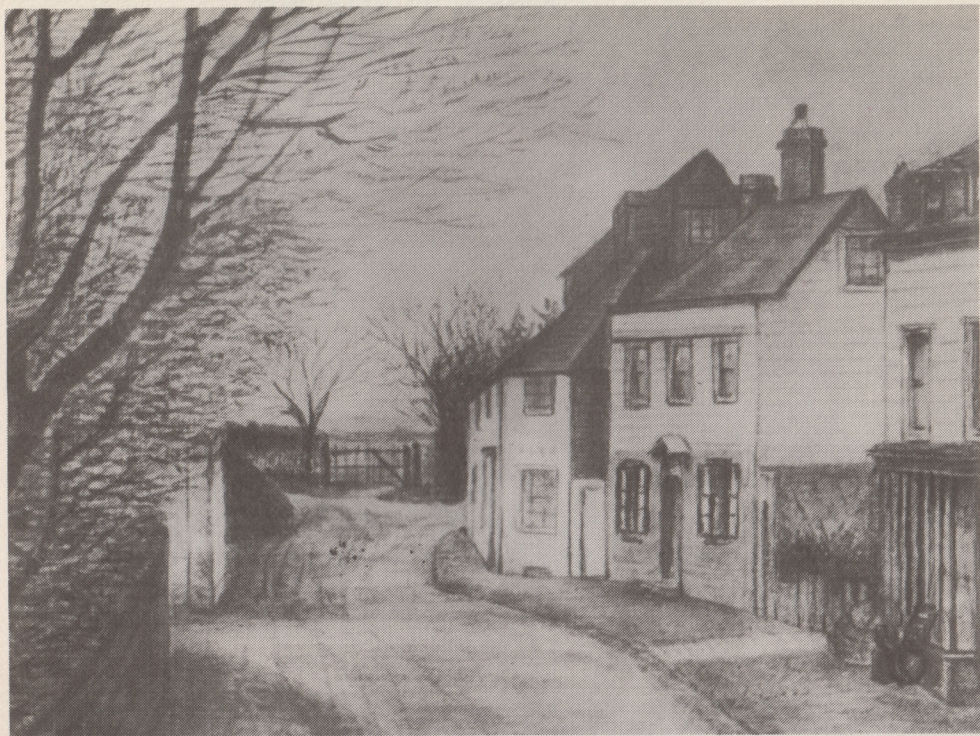
Early in 1979 the property again changed hands and agreement with the present owner to restart the clock, following essential renovations, will once again find Old Town with its venerable time-piece. The property is now the Bexhill Antique Centre, owned by Mr. T. Kingsford.



JUBILEE CLOCK



THE OLD WALNUT TREE



TOP END OF HIGH STREET IN THE 1880's.



BARRACK HALL

THE COACH HOUSE

The Coach House stands in the Manor Gardens. Built about 1886 it is nearly 100 years old. Until 1965 it was used to house the servants who worked in the Manor House and grounds. They lived on the first and second floors, and the coaches were kept on the ground floor. After the death of Lady Harmsworth the whole of the Manor site was taken over by Bexhill Council and the Coach House was used by the Parks and Gardens department to house their equipment, tractors and lawnmowers.

In August 1977 it was leased to the Servants with Jesus, a Fellowship of ladies drawn from the different traditions of the Church, who restored it as far as possible to its original design. It stands on an historic and Christian site having been given by King Offa in 772 to be used for the service and praise of God.

The ground floor is now open Mondays to Fridays 10.30am to 12.30pm and 2.30pm to 4.30pm. There is a gate near the Costume Museum and the Manor Barn which stands open during these times. The facilities offer, a reading room with a library and a refreshment room where tea and coffee are served, some one to greet you, and photographs of the different stages of the restoration on view.

You are very welcome.

OLD TOWN PRESERVATION SOCIETY

This Guide has been produced by the Old Town Preservation Society with the object of bringing to the notice of both residents and visitors the historical interest and restful charm of the oldest part of our town.

BEXHILL MUSEUM

